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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the work of the Connecticut Task Force on the Education of Early Adolescents, which convened to make recommendations for reform policies in middle grade education. Prompted by a report issued by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, this report is the result of efforts to define the specific tasks that needed to be done in the area of teacher preparation and professional development, connecting schools with parents and communities, assessing and restructuring schools, developing appropriate curriculum content, and coordinating health and social services in Connecticut. The report is divided into the following seven sections: (1) response to the Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents; (2) task force activities; (3) assessing and restructuring schools; (4) preparation and professional development; (5) connecting schools with parents and communities; (6) middle school curricula; and (7) coordinating health and social services. Each section highlights relevant points from the Carnegie report and provides specific recommendations for reform in Connecticut. A selected bibliography of middle level education is included. (MM)

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RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A REPORT OF THE CONNECTICUT TASK FORCE ON THE EDUCATION OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS

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RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A REPORT OF THE CONNECTICUT TASK FORCE

ON THE EDUCATION OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Connecticut State Departments of
Education
Health Services
and Human Resources

December 1991

This publication was produced with funds from a grant by the Carnegie Corporation of New York as part of the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative. Any part may be duplicated as long as appropriate credit is given

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PREFACE

Forces for change in middle grade education have been ignited around the country and have gained focus as a result of the first national report by the Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. In *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century,* a 17-member panel of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development cited the growing risks fostered by adolescent alcohol and drug abuse, poor school achievement and performance, and social difficulties. As many as 14 million early adolescents may be extremely vulnerable to multiple high-risk or moderate-risk behaviors and school failure. The most striking comment made in the report, from an educator's point of view, is, "Middle schools are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, yet all too often they exacerbate the problems youth face." (Carnegie, 1989, p. 32)

Clearly the successful middle schools of the '90's will be designed to better meet the unique developmental needs of young adolescents. Students who are 10 to 15 years of age experience special and diverse needs. Their physical growth spurts, intellectual characteristics, social affinities and emotional swings are demanding challenges to educators. They need educational environments that respond by providing students with opportunities for increased autonomy and by accommodating their diversities. *Turning Points* is a landmark report that not only challenges us for the first time to take a new perspective on what is the best educational setting for students at this age level but also offers specific recommendations to serve as guidelines for restructuring schools and curricula.

The Connecticut Task Force on the Education of Early Adolescents was convened to make recommendations for reform policies in the area of middle grade education. With the national education agenda now focused on the critical transitional years, our purpose was to define the specific tasks that need to be done in the area of teacher preparation and professional development, connecting schools with parents and communities, assessing and restructuring schools, developing appropriate curriculum content and coordinating health and social services in Connecticut.

The report, *Right in The Middle,* summarizes our work. I strongly urge all connected with any of the above issues to study this document closely. We recognize that recommendations for reform are only on the "cutting edge" to the extent that they are assimilated into and transform education. The responsibility for reform belongs to all of us. Together we can reset the course for youth adrift.

Virginia Rebar, Chair
Connecticut Task Force on the
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CONNECTICUT'S RESPONSE TO THE CARNEGIE CHALLENGE 1

The impetus for Connecticut to form its Task Force on the Education of Early Adolescents came from the Carnegie Corporation.

In June 1989 the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development issued a report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century,* which was prepared by the Council's Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents. This report crystallized the thinking of many educators who had been striving for years to develop more suitable educational programs for students in the middle grades.

The unique educational needs of early adolescents--students who are 10 to 15 years of age--have become increasingly evident in recent years. They are markedly different from the needs of either elementary or high school age children.

Turning Points presents eight recommendations for transforming middle grade schools to fit the special needs of young adolescent students.

- Create small communities for learning.
- Teach a core academic program for all students.
- Ensure success for all students.
- Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students.
- Staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents.
- Improve academic performance through fostering health and fitness of young adolescents.
- Reengage families in the education of young adolescents.
- Connect schools with communities.

Carnegie's Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative

Shortly after the publication of *Turning Points* the Carnegie Corporation of New York announced the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative, which is the foundation's first effort to implement the suggested reforms. In response to an invitation to the governors of all 50 states and territories, Connecticut submitted a proposal to the Carnegie Corporation for statewide reform of middle grade education and on July 1, 1990 was awarded a 15- month grant for that purpose. The title adopted for Connecticut's project was "Coordinating Connecticut Resources for Effective Middle Grade Education."

Multidisciplinary Task Force Appointed

From its inception, The Connecticut project has been a collaborative effort among the State Departments of Education, Health Services and Human Resources. One of the first actions taken was the establishment of an interagency Task Force on the Education of Early Adolescents. (See page vii for names and affiliations of task force members and supporting staff.)

The mission of Connecticut's task force was to examine the recommendations contained in *Turning points* from a truly multidisciplinary perspective. More specifically, their objectives were to assess the present status of middle grade education in Connecticut and the needs of middle grade educators for assistance in improving that education, and to make recommendations concerning the utilization of current resources and the development of new resources to facilitate further reform of middle grade education in line with the recommendations in *Turning Points*. The rich mix of members on the task force resulted in enlightening discussions about the shared responsibilities of organizations for the health, education and well-being of middle grade students.

Subcommittee Structure

Task force members organized themselves into five subcommittees. The topics with which the five groups dealt encompass the eight recommendations contained in *Turning Points*. The findings and recommendations of Connecticut's task force are presented according to the five subcommittee areas:

- assessing and restructuring schools
- preparation and professional development
- middle grade curricula
- connecting schools with parents and communities
- coordinating health and social services

TASK FORCE ACTIVITIES 2

In the course of its work, the task force engaged in a number of activities related to its primary concern for strengthening middle grade education.

Middle Grade School Survey

One of the first accomp[lishments was the development of a Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey which was administered to all public middle grade schools in the state.

The results of the survey indicated that a high percentage of schools (78% or higher) were implementing programs in which major subject-area teachers participate in interdisciplinary teams. The teams have a daily common planning period; there is a common academic curriculum for all students in the same grade; students of all achievement levels have the opportunity to work together for the majority of the school day; teachers have opportunities to make decisions about curriculum, instructional methods and materials, and schoolwide goals; and school and community health services are accessible to all students, regardless of family income or ethnic background.

Areas in need of improvement, as indicated by a lower percentage of schools implementing practices, were advisor-advisee programs, flexibility of scheduling of class periods, supervised youth-services experiences in the community, and participation of youth-serving community agencies in the education programs for all students. The task force used these results in making its recommendations for statewide improvement of middle grade education.

Networking of Schools

Another major purpose of the project is facilitating the networking of schools. In this regard, some unexpected challenges have been encountered.

Historically in Connecticut there has been a strong grassroots effort at middle-level reform. National authorities have recognized that some of the most advanced middle schools in the country are located in this state. Much informal networking among more advanced and less advanced middle-level schools existed before the present project began.

The task force proceeded to identify some key players in this informal networking and to involve them in various aspects of the middle schools project. For example, a Connecticut Middle Grades Network Planning Committee was formed. The committee, representative of urban, suburban and rural middle grade schools, collected information from the schools about their need for assistance on specific topics related to the recommendations contained in *Turning Points* and on their willingness to share their expertise with others.

This information was used as a basis for planning statewide and smaller regional conferences within the state. A statewide conference, whose theme was The Middle Grades: Policy Decisions and Economic Reality, informed local school district policymakers about the personnel and financial implications of the recommendations in *Turning Points*. The conference was jointly sponsored by the Connecticut State Departments of Education, Health Services and Human Resources.

Regional conferences provided smaller settings for school personnel to receive presentations on and to discuss critical issues in middle grade education. The meetings also served as vehicles for establishing networks of middle grade schools in regions where they did not exist.

State-Sponsored Professional Development

Project staff also worked cooperatively with State Department of Education staff who organize the state-sponsored programs of the Institute for Teaching and Learning, to develop two week-long summer sessions pertaining to a middle-level education. The first, entitled "Integrating Teaching and Learning in the Middle School," was held in North Haven on July 15-19, 1991. An adaptation of the second, "Creating Change in the Middle School," was held in East Hartford on August 12-16.

Middle Grade School Development Program

Between May and September, 1991, schools that volunteered to pilot the Connecticut Middle Grade School Development Program received training in developing the capacity to conduct middle grade reform. During this time, each school administered the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey to the school's staff. The results of this assessment are being used by staff to determine each school's status with regard to the recommendations of *Turning Points*.

Participating schools have collected data from existing student achievement outcome measures, such as the criterion-referenced state mastery scores, which are available for all students in grades 6 and 8. Other school performance measures, which are to be part

of the state-mandated Strategic School Profiles also have been used. The schools disaggregated and analyzed this data and, through a process of shared decision making, identified areas of need for further development and produced action plans for improvement during the 1991-92 school year. These schools will continue to receive facilitative assistance from the State Department of Education during this period.

Other Task Force Activities

Additional activities in which the task force members engaged are worthy of mention.

Attendance at Carnegie meetings. The task force was represented by one or more of its members at national meetings of the Middle Grade State School Policy Initiative (MGSSPI) convened by the Carnegie Corporation in 1990-91. The meetings attended by Connecticut representatives included the MGSSPI National Workshop in Pine Mountain, Georgia; the Effective State Planning for Policy Change in Middle Grade Education conference in Baltimore, Maryland; and the Integrating Services for Young Adolescents conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Consultation on the Middle Grade Survey. Another significant activity was consultation with staff of the participating state agencies on the development of the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey. The expertise of task force members was utilized in developing survey questions that would provide a valid measure of the status of middle grade education in Connecticut. After the survey was administered and the responses collected, the task force considered the implications of the results before formulating the recommendations that appear in this report.

School visitations. In order to collect firsthand information about the status of middle grade education in the state and the needs of educators in middle grade schools, task force members were given the opportunity to visit a selection of urban, suburban and rural middle schools in various geographical regions of the state. The knowledge that members gained through these visits enabled them to propose realistic steps to encourage further implementation of the recommendations of *Turning Points* in Connecticut schools.

Consultation on the continuation proposal. Task force members contributed valuable ideas and insights into the development of a proposal to the Carnegie Corporation to continue the Middle Grade School State Policy Initiative program in Connecticut for an additional two years after the end of the current project. The proposed program is based on the initial recommendations of Connecticut's Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents.

Formulating recommendations. Unquestionably, the major part of the task force's energy during the past year was spent in developing recommendations for the continued development of middle grade education in Connecticut in accord with the views expressed in *Turning Points.* The report which follows presents the recommendations of the task force for utilization of current and needed resources for this purpose. The recommendations are presented in five sections which correspond to the topics addressed by the five subcommittees. Each section represents a rationale for the importance of the topic, reflecting the concerns in *Turning Points*, and suggests ways to address the needs in each of the five areas.

ASSESSING AND RESTRUCTURING SCHOOLS 3

School should be a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development.

Decisions concerning the experiences of middle grade students should be made by the adults who know them best.

Turning Points

Presently, a mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of many middle level schools and the intellectual, social and emotional needs of young adolescents. The result is that we a failing to engage many young adolescents in productive educational programs. For many low-income and minority students, the middle grades are their last chance to avoid a diminished future.

Restructuring middle level schools means fundamentally changing the ways schools are organized in order to ensure that all students, regardless of home background and previous achievement, acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in a changing economy. The aim of restructuring is to create a performance-based system in which teachers and principals have the knowledge, authority and resources to make instructionally relevant decisions in exchange for instructionally relevant accountability for results.

Restructuring middle level schools means changing our conceptions of schooling as we know it to schooling as it could be. The new teacher must change from the role of information giver to the multiple role of mediator, facilitator and resource person. The role of the new student will change from recipient and regurgitator of facts to that of an active learner who can work independently as well as cooperatively and in teams. The new schedule must change from one of fixed time periods for each subject to larger blocks of time that allow teachers, planning cooperatively, to make decisions about the use of time which reflect value judgements, priorities and individual student needs. The new assessments must change from end-of-chapter quizzes and multiple-choice formats measuring isolated skills and facts to portfolios of the range of student work, actual performance such as writing and speaking, and authentic tasks requiring the students to relate new learnings to prior knowledge.

The Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey results indicated that, in 78 percent of Connecticut middle grade schools, there is at least partial implementation of interdisciplinary teaming in which two or more teachers of different major subjects work together with the same students. While this is reason for optimism, it is also true that, in far too many schools which are structured according to a teaming model, teachers who are members of teams still have a stronger allegiance to the subject matter departments to which they belong than to their teams.

The survey results also indicated that 77 percent of the schools implement, at least partially, a daily planning period for members of interdisciplinary teams. While these results are encouraging, there is concern that, during these days of fiscal restraint in Connecticut, local boards of education may view this planning period as a nonessential practice which is expendable and, therefore, they may not allocate the necessary funds to support this practice. If interdisciplinary teaming is to be implemented fully, it is necessary for teachers who comprise teaching teams to meet together frequently--even daily--to deal in common with matters pertaining to individual student needs, student grouping arrangements, teaching strategies and curriculum implementation.

Moreover, for students to receive the full benefit of team teaching, there needs to be sufficient opportunity for teachers in special subject areas, such as compensatory, bilingual and physical education, foreign languages and the unified arts, to meet with the members of entire teams to discuss how to deal with issues pertaining to individual students or to the instructional programs for which the teachers of special subjects are responsible.

Currently in Connecticut there are rather rigid requirements for student participation in the services provided by such state and federally funded programs as special, compensatory and bilingual education. While this is not the intent of the requirements, they do tend to exclude many students who need the benefits of the services, but who do not qualify for them under the requirements. What is needed are creative practices that do not violate the regulations for such categorical programs but do promote a policy of inclusiveness, making the benefits of such services available to a greater number of students who need them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One promising approach to these problems is to restructure the schools that young adolescents attend. The Task Force recommends that Connecticut restructure its schools to provide an environment that is more supportive of student learning in the middle grades. Excellent direction for such restructuring is provided in the recommendations contained in *Turning Points*. The following recommendations, directed as appropriate to school, district or state levels for implementation, deliberately reaffirm several of the recommendations in the Carnegie report.

School Level

1. **Organize students into small communities for learning in which there is increased likelihood that students and teachers will develop sustained personal relationships.**

   In most cases this would mean a group of students at one grade level spending the majority of the school day interacting with each other and with the same team of teachers. It may even be desirable for the same group of students to remain together for more than one year of the middle grades and to receive instruction from the same team of teachers during that period of time.

2. **Organize major subject teachers in interdisciplinary teams within grade levels rather than clustering them within subject matter departments across several grade levels.**

   Since teachers on a team will teach different subjects to the same students it is essential that adequate common planning time be made available to the team. A planning period for members of interdisciplinary teams is very desirable.

3. **Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the programs and practices that directly affect the academic and personal success of their students.**

   At the very least, teams of teachers should have opportunities to make decisions about the instructional methods and materials, grade-level curriculum, allocation of instructional time and use of common planning time.

It is also desirable that school staffs have a definite role to play in the school-wide decision-making process in regard to such issues as school-wide goals, the school curriculum, the school schedule and professional development opportunities for teachers.

State Level

4. **Include in the Connecticut school effectiveness process for middle-level education these steps:**
   (a) orientation to the school effectiveness process for board, superintendent, district staff and teachers and principals;
   (b) identification of a school leadership team representative of school programs and staff;
   (c) assessment of school status in relation to the recommendations of *Turning Points:*
   (d) team analysis of assessment findings;
   (e) collaborative decision making to establish priorities for school improvement;
   (f) action-plan development for short- and long-range improvement;
   (g) total school community involvement in action plan implementation; and
   (h) ongoing assessment of progress.

5. **Develop research-based guidelines for restructuring the middle grades to help school boards, districts and schools assess their current procedures and develop policies and action plans for the future.**

6. **Expand and enhance the program offerings of the State Department of Education 's Institute for Teaching and Learning to provide staff development for middle grade restructuring initiatives.**

7. **Conduct an examination of the current status of state funding formulas for categorical programs (special, bilingual, and compensatory education) to determine the degree to which state funding policies encourage inclusiveness of all students with special needs in school programming, flexibility to experiment with restructuring initiatives, and adaptive education to meet the needs of all students.**

8. **Propose legislation, where appropriate and based on the findings of a study of categorical programs, to revise funding formulas and policies for categorical programs in order to facilitate the redirection of existing resources to meet the needs of all students.**

9. **Review state regulations and administrative procedures that may inhibit legitimate creativity in accomplishing change in middle grade education and, where appropriate, initiate revisions.**

10. **Provide technical assistance to districts and schools to develop alternative models for delivering services to students through the resources of the special, bilingual and compensatory education programs.**

TEACHER PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT 4

Teachers in middle grade schools should be selected and specially educated to teach young adolescents.

Turning Points

The preservice preparation of beginning teachers and the continuing professional development of practicing middle-level teachers are responsibilities which are borne jointly by the state, higher education institutions, local education agencies and the individuals themselves.

Connecticut's State Board of Education has carried out the legislative mandate for an ongoing and systematic plan of professional development for teachers and administrators through various initiatives, such as the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program, through requiring school districts to provide professional development plans and by providing state-supported programs through the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL). Many ITL programs are one-week sessions held during the summer.

The BEST program provides a combination of professional support and assessment through mentors who serve as role models and assist beginning teachers in further developing teaching competencies. Assessment is done through observations conducted by trained teachers, administrators and state assessors. During these observations, achievement in the teaching competencies is measured in the classroom setting. Successful performance leads to licensure.

As a part of the ongoing and systematic professional development and support provided to teachers, each school district is required to submit a five-year professional development plan aimed at meeting the needs of its professional staff. School districts are required to provide a minimum of 18 hours of continuing education programs for their professional staffs, and teachers holding a professional educator certificate are required to earn nine continuing education units (CEUs), totaling 90 clock hours every five years.

The state also supports the professional development of its teachers through the Institute for Teaching and Learning. ITL offers workshops and conferences for teachers, with the goal of enhancing their knowledge and teaching skills.

Ongoing professional development resulting in excellence in teaching is also recognized through programs such as the Connecticut Teacher of the Year and the Celebration of Excellence, which grant cash awards and honors in recognition of outstanding teacher performance, and by the Christa McAuliffe Award for outstanding science projects.

Currently in Connecticut there is state certification for teachers of the grades prekindergarten and kindergarten, prekindergarten through grade 3, prekindergarten through grade 6 and grades 7 through 12. Also available is certification for grades 4 through 8 for those who become certified through an alternate route and for out-of state transfers. None of the current certification requirements specifically guide the preparation of Connecticut teachers for the challenge of teaching in the middle grades.

As Connecticut school districts move to reduce the size of their teaching staffs, the impact is being felt especially at the middle level. All too frequently high school teachers with strong subject matter orientation are being reassigned to the middle grades. Middle-level school administrators are then faced with several dilemmas. Often the reassigned teachers are not certified to teach at the middle grades 5 and 6, and, therefore, cannot be utilized freely in a school where they may be needed. Furthermore, these teachers often are not familiar with the unique needs of students at this age and the appropriate instructional strategies to meet those needs.

According to the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey, only half of the schools reported that teachers assigned to the middle grades have special training in early adolescent development, learning characteristics and specific instructional strategies for the age group. Without a requirement for separate certification, there is no incentive for teachers to seek additional training to prepare them to teach successfully at this level.

This problem is heightened by the lack in Connecticut of college or university programs to prepare teachers for teaching at the middle level. There are currently two or three courses being offered at higher education institutions which would be considered as true middle-level preparation courses. However, at no institution is there a complete program on either the undergraduate or graduate levels which would prepare a person for certification at the middle level, if such an option were available.

Finally, only 58 percent of the schools responding to the survey indicated that professional development opportunities in their district include ongoing training in early adolescent characteristics and special instructional strategies for the middle grades. Clearly, this is an area of need which can be met at the local level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Connecticut has a diverse array of institutions that prepare teachers for the classroom. Ways must be found, without restricting the institutions, for them to respond to the need for specialized preparation for middle grade teachers. The state should encourage its higher education institutions to ensure that the programs leading to certification for teachers address the unique developmental and educational needs of children in the middle grades.

State Level

11. **Study the feasibility of allowing teachers currently holding teaching certificates to earn middle grades endorsement via cross-endorsement provisions, based on a combination of course work and experience.**

    A certification committee should also consider a flexible middle grades internship program for certified teachers wishing to add middle grades endorsement.

12. **Work with the representatives of the Connecticut Association of Colleges and Universities for Teacher Education (CACUTE) to determine how and in what ways the present certificates can be modified to meet the recommendations contained in *Turning Points*.**

13. **Work with CACUTE representatives to develop master's degree programs specializing in curriculum and developmental issues relevant to the child in the middle grades.**

14. **Develop flexible certification regulations.**

    CACUTE representatives, state education department specialists and representatives of teachers' professional groups should study the feasibility of arranging for certification in the following ways:
    (a) identify a central core of required courses or topics for all certificates;

(b) add specialized subject matter appropriate to the age ranges for grades prek-3, 4-8 and 9-12;
(c) expect future teachers, as a matter of course, to include study in two grade ranges, so that teachers obtaining prek-8 or 4-12 certification would have specialized preparation for instructing the child in the middle grades.

15. **Develop by 1994 a middle-level teacher preparation program at the college/ university level.**

    The Connecticut Association of Colleges and Universities for Teacher Education and the State Department of Education's Bureau of Certification and Accreditation should collaborate on the development of specifications for the new program. Course work would include the developmental characteristics of early adolescent students, principles of guidance, instructional techniques, organization of middle-level education and skills in working with families of various configurations, ethnic backgrounds and races.

16. **Organize a consortium of colleges and universities to begin developing a four-course concentration in middle level education, and encourage other teacher preparation institutions to develop minicourses or specialized courses of study that would assist teachers who have been transferred to middle grades to develop the competencies they need for their new assignments.**

17. **Initiate a policy to encourage middle school administrators to require each teacher to develop a professional development plan to address a needed area of personal growth within middle-level education.**

18. **Utilize existing state-sponsored professional development mechanisms to promote middle-level education, e.g., offering professional development opportunities to middle-level educators through the existing state-sponsored Institute for Teaching and Learning, and the Principals' Academy.**

19. **Establish a Connecticut Center for Early Adolescent Education--with grant funds from the Carnegie Corporation of New York but designed to be self-supporting by 1993--to offer symposia and workshops on specialized topics pertaining to middle-level education; to identify and disseminate exemplary curricula and practices; to develop and publish resources; and to facilitate networking among middle-level schools.**

School District Level

20. Employ and assign teachers to middle grades who have the required preparation and experience, and encourage elementary and secondary teachers to earn middle grades certification when it becomes available.

21. Use existing state certification regulations to promote the earning of mandated Continuing Education Units (CEUs) in middle-level education.

22. Provide professional development experiences relevant to the needs of middle grade staff members.

23. Encourage middle-level schools to conduct building-based staff development programs that will enable the schools to implement the recommendations contained in *Turning Points.*

School Level

24. Develop and present to school district administrators and boards of education justification for district-sponsored professional development experiences related specifically to needs at the middle-level.

25. Propose plans for schoolwide planning for program improvement during full or half days provided for this purpose.

CONNECTING SCHOOLS WITH PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES 5

Families and middle grade schools must be allied through trust and respect if young adolescents are to succeed in school.

Schools and community organizations should share responsibility for each middle grade student's success.

Turning Points

Middle school students have many needs. They include, but are not limited to, preparation for adulthood and the workplace, learning to make proper choices related to drugs and sexual activity, and the development of critical reasoning skills. Middle schools cannot meet these needs alone. To fulfill their vital functions, schools will need to operate at the center of a network of community resources that include families, businesses and community agencies.

There is a common perception that, when students reach the middle grades, parents are typically less involved in their children's educational program than they were when the children were in the elementary grades and that their participation becomes even less when their children reach high school age. The results of the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey are encouraging in that 59 percent of Connecticut middle grade schools reported that parents have input in building-level educational issues and problems; in 79 percent of the schools parents understand and support the school's instructional program.

There is, however, room for improvement. Only 50 percent of the schools surveyed reported that most parents participate in a parent-teacher organization at the school. Approximately 40 percent of the schools said that parents either serve on a schoolwide governance committee or have opportunities to participate in defining building-level goals.

The greatest area of need, as indicated by the same survey results, was that of connecting schools with communities. Only 18 percent of the schools indicated that there were at least some other youth-serving community agencies helping to provide academic assistance to students. Further, only 48 percent of the schools reported that community resources related to the instructional program have been identified and are part of the regular school program. These results clearly indicate the need for schools to draw in the community with its diverse resources to support the educational program.

Survey results also indicated that in only 22 percent of the schools are supervised youth experiences in the community a part of a student's academic program. In many schools, this lack of youth service opportunities may be attributed in part to the rigid time-block scheduling of class periods which prevails.

In a related finding, 37 percent of the schools reported that they have developed collaborative arrangements with businesses, institutions or higher education and other community organizations. These results point to the need for the schools to reach out beyond the traditional institutional setting to provide experiences for students in other community settings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening cooperation and communication between schools and the communities in which they are located need not be a costly undertaking. Mostly it requires commitment to succeed. The recommendations that follow suggest some actions that can lead to closer ties among schools, parents and communities.

School Level

26. **Establish communication channels that encourage parents to ask questions and to make suggestions.**

    Initiating forums or small focus groups of parents to discuss such topics as "Problems of Young Adolescents in the Middle Schools" or providing tapes in various languages giving information about the schools can be effective. Other ways to keep parents informed and connected to the school are regular telephone calls, frequent notes, dinners, evening programs, awards, and celebrations.

27. **Collaborate with community agencies such as YMCA, YWCA, Boys' Club, Girls' Club, and Health Department to get information out to parents.**

28. **Define and continuously communicate to parents why parent involvement--taking an interest in learning at home or volunteering to help at school--is important.**

29. **Make efforts to assist parents in helping their children to learn at home.**

30. Initiate parent education programs that address the characteristics of early adolescents, positive parenting techniques and desirable home-school relations, and provide businesses with the same information for inclusion in company newsletters.

31. Establish governance committees in all middle schools, with membership to include parents and guardians, representatives from business and industry, and members of the community-at-large, to participate in the decision-making process of the schools.

32. Consider asking parent volunteers to assist in coordinating school and/or community service projects.

33. Consider utilizing assistance from grandparents and senior citizen volunteers.

34. Request information regarding ongoing Connecticut school- business partnerships from the National Association of Partners in Education (NAPE) and any information NAPE may have regarding parental involvement in early adolescent education.

35. Encourage the participation of businesses in the educational program, e.g. through mentor programs that bring together employees of businesses and students who need guidance from caring adults.

36. Develop and/or distribute information, via school-business partnerships, to employees through newsletters, bulletin board postings, lunchtime speaker programs and forums.

37. Work together with community organizations to assist students in becoming more aware of the community needs and ways to participate in area service projects.

School District Level

38. Request increased services for young adolescents by other community agencies.

Local communities can contribute to the healthy development and education of young adolescents by providing more wholesome after-school, weekend, and summer activities including recreation, sports, enrichment, and tutorial programs.

39. **Initiate the formation of an interagency Youth Council, with participating agencies sharing equal responsibility for addressing the needs of young adolescents in local communities.**

MIDDLE GRADE CURRICULA 6

Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, lead a healthy life, behave ethically and lawfully, and assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.

All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn.

Turning Points

Early adolescent years are formulative years for individuals as they progress from childhood to adolescence to adult life. During these years, a person develops values and self-concept, moves from dependence to independence and begins to make major decisions that impact his/her future life. These years can be the turning point in the lives of many individuals. Therefore, it is crucial that school curricula for the middle grades take into consideration the needs of early adolescents with respect to the developmental stages through which they pass.

In 1987 *Connecticut's Common Core of Learning* was adopted. It is a description of the skills and competencies, attitudes and attributes, and understandings and applications a Connecticut K-12 education experience should provide to all students.

The curriculum document informs the middle grades educators of the state's expectation that all students should be served in an instructional program that affirms the value of the whole student and regards competence as an entitlement that each student should claim. School districts are not mandated to accept this document, yet most are actively working to develop implementation strategies that will allow them to realize its objectives.

Additionally, all sixth- and eighth-grade students are currently required to take the Connecticut Mastery Test--a criterion-referenced examination of skills and progress in reading, language arts and mathematical understandings. These examinations are

based on developmentally appropriate practices for the grade which require students to apply various skills and knowledge. Work is continuing in assessing the impact of *Connecticut's Common Core of Learning* in Connecticut's public schools and in designing mastery tests that integrate curricular understandings and skill applications.

According to the results of the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey, in less than half of Connecticut's middle grade schools there are interdisciplinary curriculum units which are organized around integrating themes. This may be related to another finding--that in only about half of the schools is a common planning period used by teachers to integrate curricula across subject areas. If one of the ways to increase the relevance of middle-level academic programs is to integrate the curriculum areas within students' total programs, there is clearly a need to devote more time to collaborative planning in all schools than is now occurring. Moreover, this planning effort must include teachers of subject areas which fall outside of the four major areas of mathematics, language arts, science and social studies.

The survey also found that only 35 percent of Connecticut middle-level schools allow some flexibility in scheduling the length of class time during the school day. The conclusion is that, even in many schools which have adopted an interdisciplinary team-teaching structure, the traditional rigid time-block schedule--typical of high school programs--continues. This tends both to limit the opportunity for teachers to conduct leaning activities which cannot be contained within 45- or 50-minute blocks of time and to promote artificiality in the learning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The middle grade curriculum should allow students the opportunity to explore options and interests in a variety of curriculum areas so that their developmental needs are met and so that they will be prepared to make decisions that positively affect their future lives. These curriculum areas should be integrated in order to increase the meaning to students of the content of the educational programs.

The curriculum should be structured to ensure success for all students. All young adolescents should have an opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program, regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn. Particular emphasis should be placed on the needs of at-risk students. Courses need to be evaluated very frequently for relevancy.

State Level

40. Convene a statewide curriculum conference with specific focus on middle grade education.

41. Offer programs within the Institute of Teaching and Learning to assist school district personnel in developing curricula appropriate to needs of the adolescent learner and consistent with *Connecticut's Common Core of Learning*.

42. Disseminate Celebration of Excellence curriculum projects in middle grade education.

43. Develop policy which promotes the uniqueness of middle grade education.

44. Develop multidisciplinary teams to assist local school districts in integrating curriculum areas.

45. Develop and communicate to teacher preparation institutions a model curriculum for the middle grades.

46. Encourage middle grade schools to experiment with curriculum options by supporting them with consultants' assistance and, to the extent possible, with grants.

School District Level

47. Enable the staffs of middle grade schools to visit other schools in which exemplary curricula for the middle grades are being used.

School Level

48. Develop strategies to foster communication between schools and families regarding the school curriculum and provide opportunities for parental involvement in the educational program.

49. Develop strategies to foster community involvement in the middle grade program and to provide opportunities for student involvement in the community.

COORDINATING HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES 7

Young adolescents must be healthy in order to learn.

Turning Points

Adolescence is a period of dramatic physical, mental and emotional development. This growth affects every facet of a teen's life. Statistically, during the second half of the 20th century, adolescents have been the only population group that has experienced a significant increase in mortality and morbidity rates. The causes have changed from infectious illnesses to social and environmental causes such as injuries, accidents, homicides and suicides.

The adolescent issues of the 1990's include access to comprehensive primary health care (prevention, health promotion, early identification, intervention and care coordination), injury and violence prevention, sexually transmitted disease and AIDS prevention, substance abuse prevention, mental health, fitness and nutrition.

Results of the Connecticut Middle Grade School Survey indicate that 90 percent of the schools that responded are fulfilling the state mandate that they have a planned, ongoing and systematic health education program which includes all topics required by current statutes. Over 90 percent of the schools report that community and school health services are accessible to all students, students have sound and up-to-date information on health matters, and physical fitness is promoted through physical education, extracurricular and intramural sports programs.

A somewhat smaller percentage (70%) of schools in the statewide survey indicated that the school district has a formal agreement for services with community health and social service providers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The health and social services needs of our young adolescents are ever increasing as resources to address them appear to be shrinking. We must find clear, convincing methods of advocating for the best interests of our youth and, to do this effectively, we must form new creative collaborations between the medical, social service and education systems.

State Level

50. Develop and implement an ongoing system to maintain current data about the health status of middle school students.

To track the health status of students, it will be necessary to develop a profile of the health of middle school students based on existing data; identify gaps in the information about the health status of middle school children; and identify current health and social service resources at the state, regional and local levels.

51. Utilize a state-level interagency group, such as the Connecticut Advisory School Health Council (representing 42 organizations in the state interested in school health and serving in an advisory capacity on school health matters to the Commissioners of Health, Education and Children and Youth Services) as a vehicle for identifying needs, making recommendations and sharing information with local communities.

52. Obtain a policy commitment from the Governor and the Commissioners of Health, Education, and Children and Youth Services to provide leadership of, and cross-agency collaboration in, programs to improve the health of middle school students in Connecticut.

53. Promote State Board of Education certification for school nurses consistent with current standards of clinical practice in school nursing.

54. Identify and disseminate existing models designed to effectively meet the holistic needs of middle school students.

Utilizing the concept of Connecticut's Celebration of Excellence program to recognize outstanding teachers, for example, would be a way to recognize excellence in health and social service programs that link middle schools and communities and effectively use available resources. Guidelines for implementing such model programs, wherever they exist, should be made available to other communities.

55. Promote continuing education programs that enhance the ability of middle school personnel to utilize developmentally and culturally appropriate interactions with students and families and identify the experts in the state who can provide such appropriate continuing education programs.

School District Level

56. **Encourage the development of local school district health advisory councils, including as members parents of students, educators, school and community health and social service providers and other appropriate community representatives, such as businessmen, clergy, and law enforcement officers.**

    Such health advisory councils can set local priorities related to health education, health services and a healthy environment and present them to the local or regional board of education for approval. Each school should have a coordinator as an active member of the local health advisory council. Coordinators might be school administrators, social workers, nurses, psychologists, guidance counselors or teachers of physical education, home economics, science, or health.

57. **Expand the use of school buildings to meet the health and social service needs of students and families.**

    The State Department of Education could facilitate this by encouraging local boards of education to work through their health advisory councils to identify ways to make greater and more effective use of school buildings to improve community services.

58. **Encourage professional development activities that promote developmentally and culturally appropriate interactions with students and their families and that lead to increased active involvement and collaboration of families in improving middle school education, health and social services.**

59. **Identify, implement and evaluate methods for targeting and intervening with at-risk students.**

    Intervention must be handled with sensitivity. Actions to consider in developing an effective intervention program include:

    - identifying national and state programs with well documented outcome data;
    - utilizing the school nurse as an integral part of all school teams that identify and intervene with at-risk students;
    - utilizing a health advisory council to coordinate and implement intervention models on the local level;
    - ensuring that students with special health care needs receive safe and appropriate health services in school in order to maintain and/or improve their health status; and
    - ensuring that all programs implemented include a plan for evaluating program effectiveness.

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